

Beowulf

XLI

"THE bloody swath of Swedes and Geats
and the storm of their strife, were seen afar,
how folk against folk the fight had wakened.

The ancient king with his atheling band
sought his citadel, sorrowing much:
Ongentheow earl went up to his burg.
He had tested Hygelac's hardihood,
the proud one's prowess, would prove it no longer,
defied no more those fighting-wanderers
nor hoped from the seamen to save his hoard,
his bairn and his bride: so he bent him again,
old, to his earth-walls. Yet after him came
with slaughter for Swedes the standards of Hygelac
o'er peaceful plains in pride advancing,
till Hrethelings fought in the fenced town. [footnote 1]

Then Ongentheow with edge of sword,
the hoary-bearded, was held at bay,
and the folk-king there was forced to suffer
Eofor's anger. In ire, at the king
Wulf Wonreding with weapon struck;
and the chieftain's blood, for that blow, in streams
flowed 'neath his hair. No fear felt he,
stout old Scylfing, but straightway repaid
in better bargain that bitter stroke
and faced his foe with fell intent.
Nor swift enough was the son of Wonred
answer to render the aged chief;
too soon on his head the helm was cloven;
blood-bedecked he bowed to earth,
and fell adown; not doomed was he yet,
and well he waxed, though the wound was sore.

Then the hardy Hygelac-thane, [footnote 2]
when his brother fell, with broad brand smote,
giants' sword crashing through giants'-helm
across the shield-wall: sank the king,
his folk's old herdsman, fatally hurt.

There were many to bind the brother's wounds
and lift him, fast as fate allowed
his people to wield the place-of-war.
But Eofor took from Ongentheow,
earl from other, the iron-breastplate,
hard sword hilted, and helmet too,
and the hoar-chief's harness to Hygelac carried,

who took the trappings, and truly promised
rich fee 'mid folk, -- and fulfilled it so.
For that grim strife gave the Geatish lord,
Hrethel's offspring, when home he came,
 to Eofor and Wulf a wealth of treasure,
Each of them had a hundred thousand [footnote 3]
in land and linked rings; nor at less price reckoned
 mid-earth men such mighty deeds!
And to Eofor he gave his only daughter
in pledge of grace, the pride of his home.

"Such is the feud, the foeman's rage,
death-hate of men: so I deem it sure
 that the Swedish folk will seek us home
for this fall of their friends, the fighting-Scylfings,
when once they learn that our warrior leader
 lifeless lies, who land and hoard
 ever defended from all his foes,
furthered his folk's weal, finished his course
 a hardy hero. -- Now haste is best,
 that we go to gaze on our Geatish lord,
 and bear the bountiful breaker-of-rings
 to the funeral pyre. No fragments merely
shall burn with the warrior. Wealth of jewels,
 gold untold and gained in terror,
 treasure at last with his life obtained,
 all of that booty the brands shall take,
 fire shall eat it. No earl must carry
 memorial jewel. No maiden fair
 shall wreath her neck with noble ring:
 nay, sad in spirit and shorn of her gold,
 oft shall she pass o'er paths of exile
 now our lord all laughter has laid aside,
 all mirth and revel. Many a spear
 morning-cold shall be clasped armain,
 lifted aloft; nor shall lilt of harp
those warriors wake; but the wan-hued raven,
 fain o'er the fallen, his feast shall praise
 and boast to the eagle how bravely he ate
 when he and the wolf were wasting the slain."

So he told his sorrowful tidings,
and little [footnote 4] he lied, the loyal man
 of word or of work. The warriors rose;
 sad, they climbed to the Cliff-of-Eagles,
went, welling with tears, the wonder to view.

Found on the sand there, stretched at rest,
their lifeless lord, who had lavished rings
of old upon them. Ending-day
had dawned on the doughty-one; death had seized
in woful slaughter the Weders' king.
There saw they, besides, the strangest being,
loathsome, lying their leader near,
prone on the field. The fiery dragon,
fearful fiend, with flame was scorched.
Reckoned by feet, it was fifty measures
in length as it lay. Aloft erewhile
it had revelled by night, and anon come back,
seeking its den; now in death's sure clutch
it had come to the end of its earth-hall joys.
By it there stood the stoups and jars;
dishes lay there, and dear-decked swords
eaten with rust, as, on earth's lap resting,
a thousand winters they waited there.
For all that heritage huge, that gold
of bygone men, was bound by a spell, [footnote 5]
so the treasure-hall could be touched by none
of human kind, -- save that Heaven's King,
God himself, might give whom he would,
Helper of Heroes, the hoard to open, --
even such a man as seemed to him meet.

Footnotes.

1.

The line may mean: till Hrethelings stormed on the hedged shields, -- i.e. the shield-wall or hedge of defensive war -- Hrethelings, of course, are Geats.

2.

Eofor, brother to Wulf Wonreding.

3.

Sc. "value in" hides and the weight of the gold.

4.

Not at all.

5.

Laid on it when it was put in the barrow. This spell, or in our days the "curse," either prevented discovery or brought dire ills on the finder and taker.